

Mill developer lauds state tax credits, communities

By Ryan McBride, Staff Writer



JOHN D. SINNOTT, of Struever Bros., works out of his office in the Rising Sun Mills Complex in Olneyville.

Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse has undertaken several mill restoration projects in Rhode Island, including the 313,000-square-foot Rising Sun Mills in Olneyville. Similar to other projects, the mill was converted from unused industrial space to apartments and commercial areas. In Rhode Island, the cost of restoring mills is defrayed by state income tax credits for preserving historic buildings.

PBN: Struever Bros. built the Green Monster seats at Fenway Park. Has it used that now-famous project in its marketing?

Sinnott: The Fenway Park work has helped us in the Boston area, and has helped us with some credibility as far as what kinds of projects we are capable of. But what we are doing up there is very different from what we are doing down here (in Providence).

PBN: How much have state and federal tax credits for historic rehabilitations helped Struever with mill restorations?

Sinnott: Tremendously, it allows us to take these old mills that are falling apart, underutilized, usually on dirty environmental sites, not really on anybody's tax roll, and restore them to their former beauty. It also enables us to clean up any sort of environmental waste or hazard and bring new life to 'edge' communities. Further, what we try to do is create a community that operates 18 hours per day. This is a mixed-use development here at Rising Sun, there's residential and commercial components. So there is always activity here, and activity breeds security and it breeds desire to live here. It's really helped Olneyville and Valley Street and what we plan to do

on both sides of Valley Street. (Struever is planning to restore a second mill at 60 Valley St.)

PBN: With continuing restoration of old mills in Olneyville, where do you see this community in the next five to 10 years?

Sinnott: I think this is going to be the new hot spot. I think there's going to be a big influx of people who want to live back in the city, in an urban setting. In Olneyville, you're very close to downtown, you're very close to Route 6 and Route 10, and you're very close to an Amtrak station if you're heading to Boston. It's going to attract a lot of businesses, as well.

PBN: What should developers keep in mind if they wish to invest in a mill reuse project?

Sinnott: That it's not going to be easy. Besides the obvious environmental issues, you're going to run into an issue with parking. Keep in mind that many of these mills were built within walking distance to where workers lived, reducing the need for parking. The other big issue is you really have to understand the state and federal tax codes to make it work. The criteria set forth to qualify for the federal and state tax credits is pretty stringent. It's going to take time. There are a lot of structural issues. You're talking about buildings that are 150 to 100 years old, so there's going to be a lot of hidden structural problems. It takes someone who understands the buildings and the process to make it work. For developers to go from building strip malls to mill restorations, it's two different animals.

PBN: Have you noticed more developers, who see your success, try to get into this type of construction?

Sinnott: Yes, in fact, we have had developers coming through here to see what we're doing, to see what our product is. There has been more and more interest in restoring these mills, but a lot of it has to do with the state tax credits that are available and a big interest from people wanting to move back into the city.

PBN: Which is more in demand at Rising Sun, the commercial or residential space?

Sinnott: We're pretty much leased out on the commercial side. Both sides are doing quite well. I wouldn't say one is doing better than the other, I would say they are going along at the same pace. We've had a very strong interest on the residential side. There's only maybe 5,000 square feet of residential space left out of about 120,000 square feet.

PBN: Plans for 60 Valley St. include 30 affordable units, targeting the artist community. You are working with the nonprofit PUENTE on this project. How does this partnership benefit Struever?

Sinnott: It furthers a lot of what our corporate goals are. We partnered with them because we felt it was a way to get down into the community. A lot of times people may be intimidated by a developer coming into their community, no matter what a developer's intentions are. A big reason why I came to work for Struever was because of how they do things and their commitment to the community. They have a real, honest desire to do things right and to do things right and do things well.

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